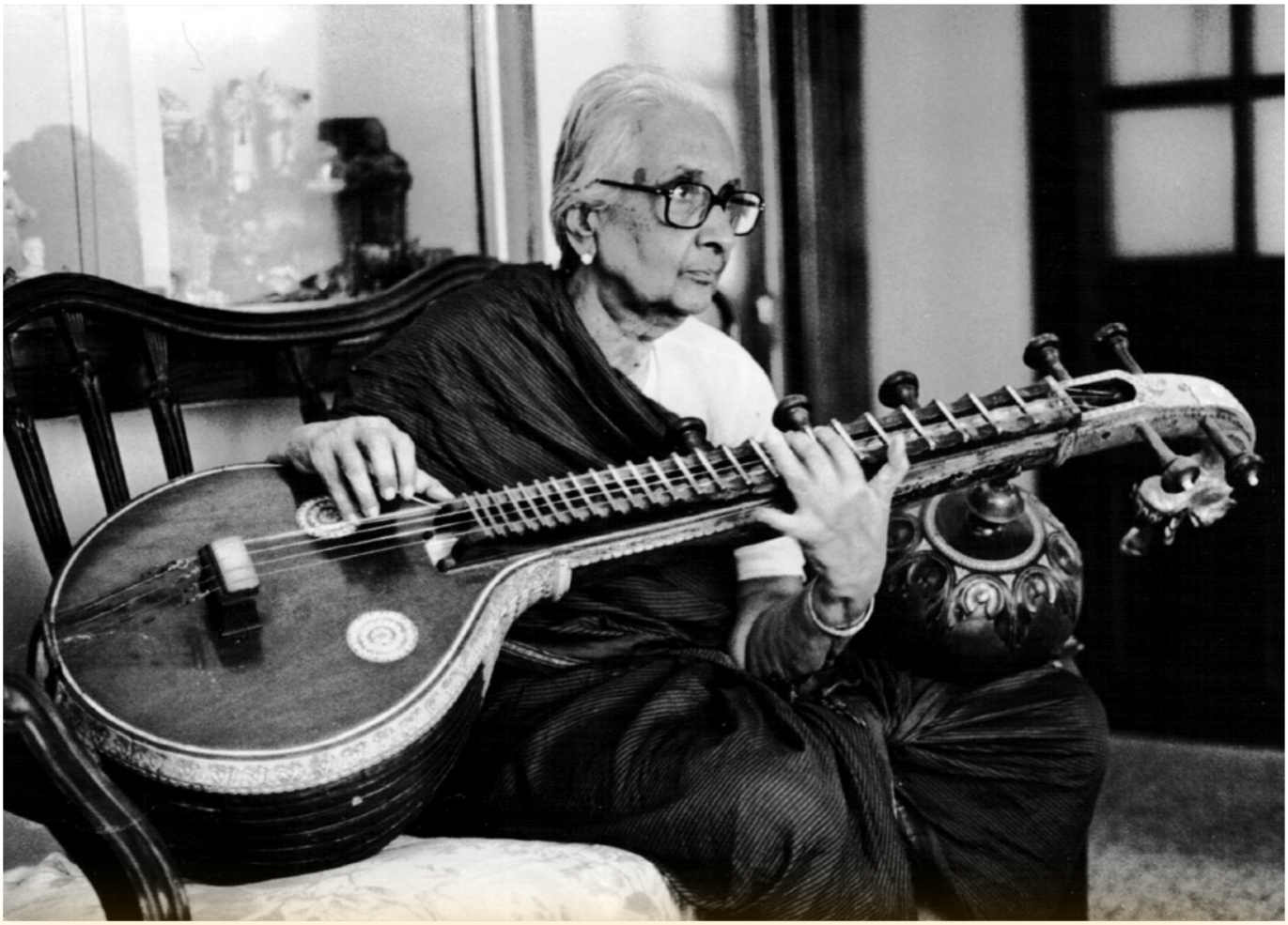

Savithri Rajan: A Flying Bird

Savithri Rajan, one of the few remaining direct links with the music of Veena Dhanammal (1867-1938), passed away on 6 May in Madras. She was 83.

When she was young, her father, Rao Bahadur Dr. T. Seethapathi Iyer, a physician who lived and practised medicine in Mylapore, had encouraged her, as well as his wife, to learn music. She had two teachers, Tiger Varadachariar and Veena Dhanammal, both musicians' musicians.

The Iyers invited Tiger to make their home his den and teach music to their children. Not wanting to make the commitment, the vidwan had demanded what was for those times an astronomical fee of 100 rupees a month, but the demand was accepted without demurral. In time Varadachariar became a beloved member of the family. "We called him Appaji," Savithri Rajan recalled, while describing how it was to learn from Tiger. The guru would begin to sing at four o'clock in the morning, taking up raga-s for elaboration in regular order. Children, waking up at different times, would tell their grandmother: "I got up during Todi today," or "Yesterday I woke up to Bhairavi."

Savithri Rajan cherished throughout her life the opportunity that she had to learn veena-playing from the legendary Dhanammal, as she was proud of being one of Tiger's cubs. "The Dhanammal style of playing the veena needs no accompaniments," she used to say. "Dhanammal made the veena a sampoorna vadya [an instrument complete in itself]. She stressed the gamaka-s. Her style was not geared to public performances."

Savithri Rajan herself gave no public performances, though she gave lecture-demonstrations on her guru-s. If she did not become a concert artist, it was out of choice. Perhaps her self-effacing attitude had something to do with it. Also she did not record her music for the commercial market and, asked why, she had explained: "I'm like a flying bird. Birds fly across the sky and leave no prints in the sky...."

Fortunately, a film has been made on Savithri Rajan. Called quite appropriately *The Flying Bird*, the film, made jointly by freelance writer C.S. Lakshmi and her husband Vishnu Mathur, records not only the personality and the perceptions of the grand dame but also vividly captures, through her recollections, the ambience of life in a household steeped in music and old-world values. It also serves to reveal that, although she shunned the centre-stage, Savithri Rajan was always ready to share her knowledge and perception of music and related subjects with anyone who was seriously interested. About four years ago, she had a book called *Sobillu Saptaswara* published, a music primer she had written with the collaboration of an American student and friend, Michael Nixon. A cassette recording based on this primer, called *The Splendorous Seven Notes*, was released in March this year.

During her long innings, Savithri Rajan had, besides fulfilling duties as a wife and mother, been active in social work. She had also travelled around the world, projecting willy-nilly the image of a Tamil woman draped in a nine-yard saree in the traditional style. And she had been an active concert-goer, attending programmes not only of Carnatic music but also of Western classical music. The world was indeed her oyster.

In *The Flying Bird*, she recalled how her outlook on life was coloured by music. She had given up music when her only son died at the young age of 20. But her mother gently drew Savithri out of the shell and persuaded her to renew her relationship with the veena. And music had restored serenity to her life.

V.R. DEVIKA

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